

Watt Happened, Watt Now, Watt Next?

On Thursday, 28th September 1989, Watt Space held its inaugural exhibition opening at its initial Watt Street premises. As September 2009 is upon us and our twentieth anniversary draws near, Watt Space prepares to host *20:20*, both a retrospective of ten former Watt Space exhibitors and a survey of ten current Watt Space exhibitors. It is foremost a celebration of our continuing success and the many success stories Watt Space has spawned. And it serves as the perfect opportunity to sit Janus-faced to what has been, is and still to come.

In its twenty years of existence Watt Space, the student gallery of the University of Newcastle, has hosted over seven hundred exhibitions from some six and half thousand exhibitors, including thirteen Annual Student Art Prizes and *Watt Decade*, a major retrospective celebrating ten years of existence. It has seen sixty student representatives sit on its formalised management committee, seen four extremely dedicated people act as full-time gallery director, witnessed the educational institution it is connected to change from the Hunter Institute of Higher Education to the University of Newcastle, changed logos, changed premises and survived VSU.

It is George Drewery who history has remembered as the beret-wearing dilettante militant, who in 1989 invaded a Student Representative Council of the Hunter Institute of Higher Education meeting using a megaphone to demand to see the SRC's financial records. He, and many other vocal students from the arts faculty, wanted the council to be more transparent in its funding of campus activities and to ascertain whether the council had enough money in its budget for the funding of a student art gallery, as art was an area considerably neglected by council funding. This student action and the delicate and sometimes not-so-delicate persuasion that followed lead to the creation of Watt Space.

Watt Space moved from its birthplace on Watt Street to University House on the corner of King and Auckland Streets in 1996. And it is there where Watt Space can be found today. It now stands monolithic as an art gallery which offers students unparalleled opportunities to develop and extend their professional practice at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level. The environment is nurturing, however the expectations on student exhibitors and volunteers are equitable to those found in other professionally run galleries. Exhibiting, curating and gallery administration all form part of the Watt Space experience and it serves as an invaluable educational resource.

Watt Space operates semi-autonomously from the university proper, instead being primarily funded by UoN Services Limited, formerly the SRC. This autonomy means that the gallery is unencumbered by official university expectations and can be offered as a space of true innovation, of rule breaking and risk taking. However in 2005 the certainty of our funding was threatened when compulsory student service fees were abolished by the then Howard government. Since then UoN Services Limited has adapted by consolidating its operations at the university, always ensuring that Watt Space was and is financially supported as its premier student facility and service.

Since 2005 universities have lobbied the Federal Government concerning the need for extra money for sporting, cultural and advocacy services on campus. However the recently introduced Student Services and

Amenities Bill which aimed to introduce a compulsory \$250 fee for university students was defeated when put to a senate vote. The arts it seems could be neglected anew.

Although our funding has been guaranteed, nothing is certain. We should not allow our thoughts to veer towards an institutionalised Watt Space. Students must continue to view Watt Space as their space, a place to fight for when necessary, where they can develop, experiment, fail, learn and above all play. Our continuing success relies not so much on secure funding, but on the continuing support and passion of the students. Those who seize the opportunity to exhibit their art at the gallery, to volunteer on opening nights, to help install exhibitions and become part of the fabric of the gallery may also need to voice their support publicly.

It was the vision, dedication and guile of the originating management committee of Jacquie Henderson, Bryan Bulley and George Drewery who laid the foundations for what Watt Space is today. We are forever indebted to their pioneering efforts. So as we look to the future and to the next twenty years, we hope that Watt Space continues to build upon its national reputation as a respected student art gallery, but also that we continue to maintain an independent stance, never afraid of asserting and insisting on our right to exist.

Luke Johnston, Fiona Lee and Claire Parker.

The Student Representatives of the 2009 Watt Space Management Committee.